

## Pemmican — the all purpose food

By Bill Palmroth

**F**ew foods have been around as long as simple pemmican. For centuries, it was a highly sought-after food of the frontier pioneers and plains Indians. Although buffalo was the preferred meat, just about any kind of meat would do in a pinch...deer, elk, moose, you name it.

As a one-time distributor of dehydrated foods, I frequently received calls from outdoor enthusiasts about various dried foods. When the subject got around to dried meats, I reluctantly had to tell them that my company offered nothing in the way of meats. Generally, I suggested that they try making their own pemmican.

### *Pounding the dried meat*

There were, and still are, many advantages to making your own pemmican. It has long-term storage value, and because it is based solely on dried meat, it is highly nutritious. Once prepared, it needs no refrigeration and can be easily reconstituted by adding water.

Today, beef, deer, elk, and moose can be easily converted into pemmican. Ten to fifteen pounds is a good amount to start with. The first step is to cut the lean parts of the meat into long strips about  $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick. These are then hung to air dry. The Indians traditionally did this in the late fall, after a couple of early frosts had killed most of nature's insects.

The drying process can take several days or weeks, depending on the weather conditions. Modern man can set the kitchen oven at slow heat and let the meat dry that way, but there is some evidence that oven drying destroys certain

amino acids and a less nutritious food results. However, if normal diets are maintained, there should be no problem.

Once the lean meat is dried, it is pounded into a powder or a string-like mass. The pounding further reduces the bulk and also drives off any remaining moisture. A log or small anvil can be used as a workbench to break up the meat fiber. The back of an axe or a wooden maul works well for breaking down the meat. In general, five to six pounds of lean meat will be needed to yield about a pound of dried meat needed for pounding, which is long and sometimes hard work.

Fat is the next most important element in the recipe. Beef fat is preferred. The fat from wild game is also excellent for this part of the recipe, and if there is not enough from one animal, beef fat can be added into the mix. The rule of thumb in pemmican making is to allow one pound of fat for every pound of dried lean meat.

Remove the fat from the carcass, place it in a pot, and slowly heat the mix until liquid. Once the fat is liquid, add it to the mix of pounded meat. Stir the contents into an even mix. Let the extra mix cool and harden. The final result is old-style pemmican.

Although native wild berries were sometimes added to early-day pemmican, it wasn't until much later that spices and dried fruits became regular additions to pemmican recipes. This was for no other reason than to please the white man's palate.

Modern recipes call for the addition of raisins, black currants, and even sugar (something I don't recommend). If wild berries are used, they need to be crushed and dried before adding them to the pemmican. Oatmeal and flour also have been added by some cooks, as have cornmeal and nuts. A number of spices—including salt, oregano, pepper, bay leaves, and garlic salt—have been advocated as ways of improving taste.

Pemmican can be stored in glass jars or in muslin or canvas sacks. It can also be frozen, but be sure to allow plenty of time for a chunk to thaw prior to taking it on a trip or hike. Under normal storage conditions, it will last up to two years.

The pemmican can be eaten as it is or reconstituted much the same way modern freeze-dried foods are soaked and allowed to take up water. Then it can be browned and tossed into a stew with dumplings, or water can be added to make a kind of meaty broth.

Old-fashioned pemmican will give any modern-day food a good run for its money. Δ